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ABSTRACT

Classroom techniques for encouraging native Japanese-speaking learners of English to begin the writing process in English, rather than depending on translation from Japanese, are offered. They consist of short, structured exercises with parameters based on spelling, word length, syllable count, alphabetization, pronunciation, letter shape, and other untranslatable aspects of English. At the beginning of each class meeting, a new exercise is presented. For example, students are given one or two model sentences in which every word begins with a certain letter, or are asked to rephrase a sentence without using a given letter. Successful attempts are written on the board to encourage students. After these exercises, students proceed to regular classroom writing tasks. Twenty-six exercises are described, organized according to the untranslatable feature on which they are based, as noted above (spelling, etc.). Contains 41 references. (MSE)

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Language-Specific Composition Warm-Ups

by Margaret Orleans

I'm sure your students are just like mine. When it comes to writing something, or many times even saying something, in class, they automatically put it together in Japanese first and then translate it to English. I feel that this automatic translation habit hinders their improvement and I would like to share with you a series of short warm-up activities that I have found force students to compose directly in English--or whatever the target L2 may be.

Isn't it better for students to use their L1 skills?

Studies by Lay (1982), Zamel (1993), Arndt (1987), Hall (1990), and Friedlander (1990) would seem to suggest this course of action. They found that students planned better, revised more thoroughly, and produced longer and more complex writing samples when they had recourse to their L1. However, they were working with subjects who had received instruction in writing in their L1 and who were in an EFL setting at the time of the studies. Japanese students, on the other hand, receive little instruction in composition beyond the elementary level. Though they may take a course called composition in high school and again in college, such courses—if they are part of the Japanese curriculum—usually consist of reading model compositions or—if they are part of the English curriculum—translating model sentences into English (Mok, 1993). Japanese students have little opportunity to write in their native language after elementary school. They are not asked essay questions on exams in junior or senior high school or college, nor are they required to write reports, except perhaps a short paper in their final year of tertiary education, if they are majoring in one of the humanities.

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Perhaps this lack of writing instruction is part of the backwash from the influential university entrance examinations, which seldom have a composition component (Deng, 1995). Whatever its cause, the result is that they tend to have few planning, composing, or revising strategies to transfer from L1 to L2. Recourse to L1 in the composing process is unlikely to bring them the benefits it did in the studied cited above.

Is it really necessary to learn to compose directly in the L2?

Despite the acknowledgment of positive influences from L1 in L2 writing, most researchers state or imply that writing directly in English is the preferred end of a continuum. Most ESL and EFL writers in the studies above and in this writer's experience state it as a goal. Some would propose that writing directly in the target language is necessary when there are great differences in logic and style between the two languages involved. Deng (1995) and Hinds (1987, 1990), among others, point out fundamental differences in organizational patterns, use of discourse markers, point of introduction of thesis, audience burden, tolerance for ambiguity, etc., between Japanese and English. .

However, these issues of contrastive rhetoric are open to debate and are probably of more concern to Japanese graduate students and academics, writing for publication in international journals, than to the average Japanese undergraduate. As Mok (1993) points out, Japanese students these days are not familiar with classical Japanese essay forms. They have more exposure to the more loosely constructed pattern of returning time and again to a baseline theme before setting out in a new direction with each sub-

sequent point, a pattern that is also dissimilar to Western patterns of discourse. When Japanese students are writing for peer audiences and are unlikely ever to write for any other—except the teacher—Kachru's (1996) interlocutor myth (the mistaken assumption on the part of native English speakers that all non-native speakers of English use that language only for communication with native speakers) has to be taken into consideration. If one takes seriously the process or discourse models of writing, it is probably a more communicative use of English for students to write with their L2 audience in mind than to retrain themselves and their readers both in an imposed canonical rhetoric.

What are the disadvantages of depending on the L1 during the composing process?

Matsuhashi (1987) has posited that most critical revision takes place at the moment of inscription. Students "hear" the composition as they write it down and pause or backtrack to express their meaning more clearly or completely. This sort of revision is unlikely to take place at the moment of inscribing a translation, however. Rinnert (1990) cites Lado's (1979) observation that students who translate are preoccupied with the surface level of the language to explain the higher incidence of errors in translation than in direct writing. Jones (1985) uses Krashen's (1982) monitor theory to explain his subjects' inability to "keep up the standard," (Uzawa and Cumming's [1989] term for producing L2 writing at the level of one's L1 competence).

> ...when the monitor is used: The general semantics of the sentence are worked out, the lexical items are chosen, and

> then a syntactic structure is imposed on the lexical material. If this is a correct description, then the selected lexical items must be kept in short-term memory (STM) while the grammatical rules are being used to construct the syntactic form. Because the monitor requires conscious use of rules, the monitor itself also uses some space in STM, reducing the capacity for text. Further, in order that the rules can be applied to it, the text must be in STM in sentential rather than in gist form because the actual lexical items and the choice of phrases must be available for the output constraints that constitute the monitor to review; this, too, reduces STM capacity.... Writers who monitor heavily are likely to work with very short chunks of text since only a limited amount of information can be held in STM. (Jones, p. 103)

Japanese EFL learners are routinely characterized as heavy monitor users (Gray, 1994; Mayer, 1994). This relationship Jones posits between monitor use and short-term memory in composition seems borne out by the following comments, made by students of this writer when they reflected on their inability to compose directly in English.

> So I rembere the English grammar in Japanese and the English spell in Japanese

> If I remember the mean of the word that I want to say,
>
> but it doesn't become a sentence.

Friedlander (1990) suggests that the act of translation constrains STM in the same way as heavy monitor use, resulting in a diminished quality of writing.

Planning, revising, and vocabulary have been found to be troublesome for inexperienced writers. I will look at planning later, in conjunction with the Jones and Tetroe (1987) study, and at vocabulary as it relates to translation and the work of Cohen and Hawras (1996). Now I would like to concentrate on revision.

Japanese learners seem to have a tendency to assume that once they've gotten something down on paper, it's finished and that there is no need for re-reading it, much less re-writing it, a phenomenon Hinds (1987) relates to cultural attitudes that place a large share of the responsibility for understanding the writer's meaning on the reader. Raimes (1985) and Perl (1979, cited in Raimes) consider this sort of unmindfulness of the reader to be a characteristic shared by most unskilled L1 writers of English. Hall (1990) found that inexperienced writers, working in L1 or L2, tended to make only local revisions—of a single word or phrase.

When inexperience and L2 dependence coincide, whatever time and energy students might have for making sure that they have actually said what they meant to say and that what they meant to say was complete and convincing enough seems to be

used up in the arduous process of translation.

> The act of producing L2 writing in this study seemed to be so involving and exhausting that production of a new draft was rare. (Raimes, 1985, p. 245)

1.2.4 Ingrained Habit of Translation

Rinnert and Kobayashi (1992), in a study comparing holistic scores and error rates for direct writing and translation, mention an overdependence on their native language on the part of their Japanese subjects They relate that even when supposedly writing directly, eighty-seven percent of lower-level learners reported that they were actually translating mentally. In effect, the higher rating for the translated compositions of many their lower-level subjects was a function of time (two hours to translate versus one), not method (translation versus direct writing). Because seventy-seven percent of her subjects mentioned difficulty in or the impossibility of translation, Rinnert (1990) found translation such a problematic area that she suggested designing further studies to avoid it, substituting direct evaluation of L1 writing, L1 note-taking and planning, or some other use of L1 instead.

Such an overdependence on translation is not surprising when not only writing (Wachs, 1993), but also reading (Bamford, 1993; Ito, 1995; Cohen and Hawras, 1996), speaking, and even listening (Richards, 1995) are taught as translation activities. As one on my students once succinctly put it, "My method is following: First I think 'arigatou' in my mind. And, I say 'Thank you!'"

Law (1995) says it is a mistake to call *yakudoku* (literally, "translation reading"—the most widespread approach to teaching English in Japan) grammar/translation. Not only is this approach to English considered "a rigorous mental discipline that can be argued to have an educational value comparable to that associated with the study of Classics in post-Renaissance Europe," (p. 215), with the same resultant lack of communicative competence, but it "in many ways reproduces [the] reflexive process" of pitting English against Japanese as its negative image in a dualistic view of the world. When students translate from English to Japanese,

> it is a three-stage operation, involving first a word-by-word translation of the target sentence, then a reordering of the words thus derived, and finally a recoding into Japanese syntax.... [T]he focus of attention is only initially on the codes of the foreign language; most of the productive energy of the method is directed towards the recoded Japanese version.... [T]he effective educational content may be largely limited to training in the student's native language. (pp. 215-6)

Similarly, when translating from Japanese to English—which is likely to occur only in a series of disconnected sentences (Law; Mok, 1993)—students focus primarily on the Japanese-coded version.

Looking at writing as a process, as a dialogue between writer and reader, becomes

doubly difficult then. Because the real composition exists as the Japanese original in the mind or on the scrap paper of the writer, peer readers and teachers have trouble discussing the ideas, organization, and phrasing of the writing with its author, for whom the English version is often an alien text which must be painstakingly re-translated in order to be read by her.

Raimes (1985) has identified inadequate vocabulary (including an inability to judge register) as a characteristic shared by writers unskilled in either L1 or L2. In the case of Japanese writers of English, this characteristic seems to be related to their overdependence on translation.

Typical first-year Japanese university students have large vocabularies. In order to pass the entrance exam, they have memorized thousands of words. While they may not recognize these words when they hear them spoken because they have learned a distorted pronunciation as an aid to memorizing the spelling, and while they may rapidly forget those words they don't use, so that students in their last year of university or junior college typically have lower scores on the same standardized vocabulary tests than they did as incoming freshmen, still they do know a lot of words. But since on the entrance exam they are asked only to recognize or provide the English or Japanese equivalent of a given word, they lack the rich associations they have for words in their L1, a factor that Cohen and Hawras (1996) cite as a reason low and intermediate students in their study resorted to translating fifty percent of the time while reading, without achieving comprehension in more than fifty percent of those cases. These missing

associations are a necessary component of meaningful learning in Ausubel's (1963, cited in Brown, 1994) model. Linking an English word to one's cognitive structure only through a Japanese equivalent is a type of rote learning, not meaningful learning. This is consistent with Rinnert's (1992) finding that inappropriate word choice comprised by far the most frequent type of serious errors in L2 compositions.

How can one break the translation habit?

Hamp-Lyons (1991) points out that one of the most exciting things about teaching writing to L2 learners is that, compared to their native-speaking counterparts of the same age, they have a greater capacity for rapid improvement. I think it becomes clear that one way to tap this capacity for Japanese students is to help them break the automatic translation habit.

How? Several techniques have been suggested. Jones and Tetroe (1987) designed narrative and argumentative writing tasks with a target final sentence in an effort to help their students do their planning in the language in which they were writing. They found an impressive improvement in the amount of planning, compared to conventional essays by the same subjects, though it was lower for L2 than for L1 because of the subjects' inability to add to less well-planned sections during the course of writing.

> We would summarize our conclusions about their use of first language in second-language composing as being principally a matter of vocabulary. Where writers lack second-language vocabulary, they naturally fall back upon

> their native language. When we provided the vocabulary for the subjects with lower proficiency, as we did in the ending-sentence tasks, we effected a reduction in the amount of first language while composing in the second. (pp. 54-55)

Jones and Tetroe's subjects were native speakers of Spanish in an ESL setting. Would their findings hold true for Japanese subjects in an EFL settings? Perhaps they would, but such a macrocosmic, top-down approach leaves ample room for students who habitually translate even the days of the week and lists of ingredients in a recipe when doing information gap activities with a partner, plenty to scope to do the bulk of such an activity in their L1.

Kaplan (1967) suggests students be given culture-specific models and outlines to follow that will inhibit the transfer of specific L1 discourse patterns. He gives the example of Arabic-speaking ESL learners who use numerous coordinate clauses where native speakers of English (for whose language parallelism was supplanted by subordination as the elegant standard in the 17th century) would use subordinate clauses. Kaplan's remedy for this and other culturally influenced modes of expression is "more pattern drill, but at the rhetorical rather than at the syntactic level." (p. 15) By this he means,

> the student probably ought to begin the study of paragraphs by simply copying models or by manipulating

> carefully controlled models.... Ultimately, as the student becomes more proficient, he can be permitted to perform slot-substitution drills; that is, he can be given paragraphs with certain sentences left out, and he can be required to fill the slots. It is not until the student has had a good deal of controlled exercise that he can be asked to write a composition on a topic in the same way that the American high school student or college freshman is asked to do. And even then, it is probably wise to keep some rein on the student through the use of the outline as a disciplinary device which forces the student to give attention to the structure of his whole composition. (p. 15)

I know of no study testing the merits of such a system, but Zamel (1983) dismisses it as a predictive approach less effective than post-hoc error analyses as a basis for individualized learner syllabi.

Instead, I would combine the low-level intervention of Kaplan (since the students are processing language bottom-up) with the wider scope for originality of Jones and Tetroe into short, structured exercises with parameters based on spelling, word length, syllable-count, alphabetization, pronunciation, letter shape, and other untranslatable aspects of English.

My usual approach to incorporating them into a composition course is to explain

and demonstrate a new exercise at the beginning of each class meeting. For example students are given one or two model sentences in which every word begins with the same letter, or are asked to rephrase a sentence without using a given letter. For the first ten minutes or so, I circulate among students, responding to questions and offering suggestions as they compose (with the help of a dictionary, at their discretion). I write particularly successful attempts on the board until students begin to feel free enough to write their own best efforts there, where they can be shared by the class and often stimulate further examples. The class then moves on to a longer composition, to which the warm-up may or may not have been related in structure or theme.

I have been using such activities for over a decade now, with students in China and Japan. Most can be adapted to any level of student. Perhaps Japanese students particularly enjoy them because they tend to feel more comfortable in structured environments, when they know exactly what is expected of them (Migdalek, 1996).

I have grouped the activities according to the untranslatable feature of English on which they are based, though they could just as well be grouped according to features such as article use, subject-verb agreement, collocation, and so on, which students need to have mastered in order to produce successful examples. They could also be readily adapted to other target second languages.

Exercises Based on Spelling

START AT THE VERY BEGINNING: Students write sentences in which the first word begins with A, the second word begins with B, the third with C, and so on.

I encourage them to aim for sentences of ten words or so. For example, *Amy's beautiful cat didn't ever fear getting hurt in jumping.* Of course, one could actually start anywhere in the alphabet and progress forward or backward.

PUSHING PENCILS, TWISTING TONGUES: Students write sentences in which all the words begin with the same letter. For example, *Except Easter eggs, Ed's eaten every egg example ever encountered.* Or *If Irene is interested, I'll include Irvin in it immediately.*

LAST BUT NOT LEAST: The most obvious variation on the above activities is to make the last letter of the word the target letter. Thus, students write sentences in which all the words end with the same letter or the last letter of each word progresses alphabetically. This is much more difficult, just as filling in crossword answers for which one has only the final letter are more difficult than those for which one has the initial letter. Examples: *She ate one slice before he stole the pie. Mac had gone gulf fishing with Cindi.*

CHAIN LINK SENTENCES: The last letter of the first word becomes the first letter of the second word, the last letter of the second word becomes the first letter of the third word, and so on. This is probably the easiest exercise to explain to Japanese students because it resembles a children's word game called *shiritori* (Grabbing the Tail). For example, *If few women need diaries, sales should drop presently.*

WHAT'S IN A NAME?: Using only the letters in their full names (or a seasonal phrase), though they may re-use them in each new word, students write sentences of at

least six words. For example, someone named Thomas Iver Bradley might write, *I have a very sad story to relate.*

REVERSE ACRONYMS: Students use their given or family names to write a sentence in which the first word begins with the first letter of a name, the second word with the second letter, and so on. For example, *Thomas* could lead to a sentence such as *Two horses of mine are sick.*

NAME THAT CLUB: Students create acronyms, suggesting names for student clubs, international aid organizations, etc., in which the acronym relates to the phrase it spells out. I try to elicit examples of acronyms they already know, such as AIDS, OPEC, and ASEAN, and then give more serendipitous ones like VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) or TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly).

DROPPING ONE'S HAITCHES: Students write lipograms for a given sentence, omitting a different letter in each rephrasing. For example, *I'm not married* without M becomes *I have no spouse*; without O, it becomes *I am single*, etc.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN: Students write sentences in which every word has a least one silent letter. For example, *Whose goat came when Thomas whistled?*

READING BETWEEN THE WORDS: Students hide given words, or words of their own choice—perhaps one in a given word class or lexical set—in sentences by splitting the word between two consecutive (or among three or more consecutive) words without changing the order of the letters. For example, *iris* might be disguised in *Sir, is this your glove?* or *I rise at six and have breakfast at six-thirty,* while a fel-

low flower might appear in *Please tie this rope on your bicycle.*

THE I'S HAVE IT: Students write sentences in which only a single vowel is used. Examples: *I might find his writing timid. Cold or hot, dogs won't rot.*

CONSTANT CONSONANTS: Even more difficult is for students to write a sentence in which only a single consonant is used. For example, *Bob, buy a baby bib.*

NOTHING IN COMMON: Students write sentences in which no two consecutive words may share any common letters. Examples: *Should we try a cheese pizza? After July had gone, I felt so lazy.*

EVEN THE KITCHEN SINK: Students write pangrammatic sentences, using every letter of the alphabet at least once. For example, *Unluckily his jumping vexed a few zebras, so he quit.*

DOUBLE OR NOTHING: Students write sentences in which every word has a doubled letter. For example, *Donning glass slippers, Cinderella hurried ball-ward.*

RELATIVELY SPEAKING: This is a series of exercises based on the travels of a certain easily swayed Aunt Hildegarde, a character invented by David Diefendorf (1983a, 1983b, 1984c, 1984d) in set of four logic puzzles for native speakers of English. I have expanded the series.

Whenever Aunt Hildegarde visits a relative, her preferences are influenced by that relative's name. For example, after spending a few days with Aunt Tillie, she likes mirrors but not reflections, books but not magazines, the color yellow but not orange, and coffee but not tea. Why? Because these words, like Aunt Tillie's name, all con-

tain doubled letters.

After visiting Uncle Byron, Aunt Tillie comes to prefer indigo to yellow or orange, or even blue. She also likes tomorrow better than yesterday and prefers consulting an atlas to maps. She finds herself forgetting more than she remembers. Why? Because these words, like Uncle Byron's name, begin with a preposition.

But once she has been to see Aunt Abigail, Hildegarde has a new set of preferences: She prefers operations to surgery, listening to noise rather than sounds, and shopping in a department store rather in a supermarket. Why? Because these words, like Aunt Abigail's name, begin with two consecutive letters of the alphabet.

Then comes a visit to Uncle Toby, after which Aunt Hildegarde's tastes run to triplets rather than twins. She would rather eat a carrot than a cucumber and likes meat more than vegetables. When indisposed, she would rather swallow a tablet than a capsule. Why? Because these words, like Uncle Toby's name, can be split in half to form two separate words.

A visit with Aunt Mary has Aunt Hildegarde preferring juniper to spruce and sepulchers to tombs. She would rather get married than be wed or eat an apricot than a prune. Why? Because these words begin with the three-letter abbreviations for the months, as does Aunt Mary's name.

When she returns after a stay with Uncle Thomas, Hildegarde likes knives better than forks and admires crocheting more than embroidery. She would rather contract pneumonia than mumps. Why: Because these words, like Uncle Thomas' name, con-

tain silent consonants.

A visit with Aunt Louella results in Hildegarde's preferring cinnamon to curry, raspberries to apricots, and lollipops to suckers. Why? Because the names of these edibles contain three instances of a single letter, like Aunt Louella's name.

With or without explanations of the word patterns, depending on their aptitude for such puzzles, students are asked to write examples of Aunt Hildegarde's new fancies on each occasion.

Exercises Based on Word and Sentence Length

DOWN ON ALL FOURS: Students write sentences in which all the words are of a pre-determined length. For example, a sentence of four-letter words might run, *What four boys came home last?*, or one of three-letter words, *Sue and Sam can fly for one day, but not two.* Word lengths of three to six letters are easiest for students.

LONGER THAN ALWAYS: Students write sentences that begin with a one-letter word, followed by a two-letter word, followed by a three-letter word, and so on. For example, *I am the only witty female student learning beautiful, effortless Belorussian.*

THE SKY'S NOT THE LIMIT: Students write sentences with a pre-determined number of letters, say 65.

DON'T SHOOT FOR THE MOON: Students write paragraphs with a pre-determined number of words, say 50, none of which may be repeated.

ON WITH THEIR HEADS: Students write headlines of a pre-determined length, say two lines with a maximum of twelve letters and spaces each, for short human in-

terest stories, clipped from the newspaper and beheaded.

Exercises Based on Meter, Syllable Count, and Rhyme

GALLOPING GALOSHES: Students write sentences composed entirely of three-syllable words. For example, *Trumpeting elephants suddenly disappeared underneath velvety vermilion telephones.*

SAUCE FOR MOTHER GOOSE: Students write the fourth line to an unfamiliar nursery rhyme. (Nearly all nursery rhymes are unfamiliar to Japanese students.)

LOOK WHAT THEY'VE DONE TO MY SONG: Students choose a familiar melody with a four-line stanza and retell a familiar story so that it can be sung to that melody. For example, the story of Peach Boy (*Momotaro*) set to the tune of *Coming through the Rye* (a melody to which people cross at traffic lights throughout Japan). Or they add additional verses to songs like *Down by the Bay; Michael, Row the Boat Ashore; Hey Lolly, Lolly;* and *Skip to My Lou.* A favorite exercise of my college students in China and Japan has been to create verses complaining about their own schools to *I Don't Want No More of Army Life.*

Exercise Based on Grammatical Patterns

PARSED PARODIES: Students rewrite a given sentence or paragraph (of their own or from a text they are studying) by substituting nouns for nouns, determiners for determiners, verbs for verbs, etc. For example, the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* could be transformed to *He seemed the height of chivalry; he appeared a paragon of politeness,* or the initial sentence of *Moby Dick* might become *Name it Lady*

Pacman.

Exercise Based on Letter Shapes

KEEPING IN SHAPE: Paying attention to which letters contain ascenders or descenders, students write sentences in which all the words conform to a given shape. For example, if the pattern is an initial ascender and no descenders, one might write, *How does he know her*? If the pattern calls for a complete avoidance of both ascenders and descenders, one might use, *Can we see our own noses or ears*? Since all capital letters ascend and the first word of each sentence must be capitalized, it is practical to ignore the first letter or to consider it in its lower-case form.

Explanations of some of the above activities appeared in slightly different forms in Orleans (1988), Orleans (1994), and Orleans (1995).

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